

Chapter 9- Exiles and Their Consequences

This section traces the history of Israel/ Judah from the 8th centuries onward and describes the events underlying the texts from Nebuchadnezzar to Cyrus, and, in particular, Judah during the period of Babylonian rule. K. writes 'Because the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as Lamentations, contain a good deal of information relating to the time before and after the fall of Jerusalem, it is quite possible to sketch the consequences of that event for Judah's social structure' (p. 120). Naturally there are problems with this point of view, but it is, admittedly, the dominant one among scholars of the Hebrew Bible.

Kessler does make a series of fascinating observations concerning the competing segments of society during the period of Jeremiah. In fact, he sees one segment of that society as supportive of Gedaliah's rule (namely, Jeremiah and those sympathetic to him) while the person or persons responsible for the book of Lamentations took a different viewpoint. 'One social group sees Gedaliah's measures as a restoration of a just division of land while another regards the same action as despoliation. That now 'the poor people who owned nothing' (Jer 39:10) have the upper hand looks to them like being ruled by 'slaves' (Lam 5:8)' (p. 123)! I find this observation utterly amazing. Indeed, in light of very recent discoveries in Jerusalem, it may be time to reexamine the whole of the 'Gedaliah' era.

Kessler moves next to a rather commonplace description of Israel in exile and notes that the major sociological change during this period was the movement away from a pure kinship-society to a community oriented towards the extended family. 'This registration by extended family that developed during the Babylonian exile constituted the social basis that held the exiles together and preserved their identity' (p. 126). I fail to see, however, how a purely kinship-based social structure is replaced by an 'extended family'. The latter is simply, it seems to me, an expansion of the former rather than something new or unusual.

The chapter concludes with a brief piece on the Egyptian Exile - an exile which is normally overlooked, I think. 'While the Babylonian exile dominated the development of Jewish society in the Persian period, the Egyptian exiles were marginal during that time. Their greatest period would come during the Hellenistic era' (p. 127). I'm interested in seeing how he works that out.

Chapter Ten – Provincial Society Under Persia

The predominant theme of this chapter is an historical recapitulation of the biblical telling of the Persian period (from Ezra and Nehemiah). Along the way, though, Kessler makes a series of genuinely intriguing remarks. For instance, '... the question of mixed marriages was so explosive precisely because, apparently, women had the right of inheritance, so that the property of Jewish families might fall into foreign hands through a woman's marrying outside the Land, or through the foreign wife of a Judahite man. The polemic against mixed marriages is not, then, about misogyny, but about group identity' (p. 134). And, 'Job 24 reveals in a devastating way the degree of degradation possible at society's lower margins' (p. 135). Whether or not he so intends, Kessler's observation help those interested in dating the biblical materials- for his sociological analysis offers a window on just the sorts of happenings which produced those materials. Or, in other words, Job must date from the Persian period because it fits nicely into the concerns of that era.

Another example of the foregoing is found in Lev 25. '... the provision that after fifty years 'you shall return, every one of you, to your property' (Lev 25:10) could also be concretely read to mean that after the fifty years of the exile – corresponding more or less to the period between 587 and 537 – lost property should again fall to the returnees' (p. 137-138). Sociological analysis, it seems, offers not just an opportunity to understand the society of ancient Israel, but the background of its textual production as well.

K. turns to an extended discussion of the Temple and the Torah and then once more examines the Egyptian Diaspora and concludes the chapter with an analysis of the question, 'what is a Jew?' 'As a result of the exile, 'Jews' ... are all those who understand themselves as descendents of the old Judeans, whether they live in or outside the Land. Even the Jewish inhabitants of Egyptian Elephantine called themselves that, as their documents prove' (p. 156).

In light of all the preceding, one is forced to wonder what sort of image we would have of Israelite society were we to find ourselves without the biblical text. Leviticus fits nicely into the Persian period because the Persian period (as seen in the biblical text) offers evidence thereto. The circularity is plain enough to see. And perhaps, given the dearth of sources in our possession, that is simply a necessary evil.

Next- the Hellenistic period.

Chapter 11- The Jewish Ethnos in the Hellenistic Age

This section begins, as they all have, with an historical overview. Kessler surveys the history of Israel from Alexander to the Hasmoneans. Along the way he notes the 'notable expansion of the money economy' that took place in the culture of Israel during that epoch. 'Traces of the significance of the money economy are everywhere to be found' (p. 163). He next moves to describe the governmental system in place during the post-Persian era. 'The most striking difference between Ptolemaic rule and that of the Persians was that the central weight of political decision making was shifted from the province to the capital' (p. 166). And, '... in the Hellenistic period the high priest had the position that had been occupied by the governor in the Persian Era; from being the head of the college of priests, he has become the primary representative for the Jewish community' (p. 166).

Israelite society, previously centered on the family, clan and tribe and thus a coherent, cohesive and 'unified' entity began to fragment, though, in the Hellenistic period. This because of the attempt by some Jews to integrate into Greek society and the refusal to do so of others. Kessler - hence - moves to describe 'The Many forms of 'Israel' (p. 170ff.). The arrival of the 'Hasideans' on the scene allows us, for the first time, to 'recognize a defined group that is characterized primarily by its religious attitude. It has an independent form of organization, a sustaining social group; it engages itself programmatically for a particular religious interest; and it acts independently in religio-political affairs' (p. 174). Or, in sum, we have from here forward the claims of various groups that they represent the true 'Israel'. The Essenes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and eventually, the Christians, would all make this claim.

If I am understanding Kessler correctly, he seems to be suggesting in this chapter that the bonds which once held 'Israel' together, bonds of family and lineage, are now abandoned to a certain extent and the focus of 'who really is a Jew' turns to find its answer in religious practice alone.

The old 'Israel' of tribal alliances and common ancestry is abandoned. Judaism has replaced it.

Next, the conclusion of the matter.

Conclusion

In the opening paragraph of the conclusion, Kessler opines 'All that remains is a look backward and a look forward. The look backward addresses a twofold question: first, whether we have been able to observe continuing features in Israel's social history that transcend epochs; second, the problem of identifying the entity called 'Israel', the issue we addressed at the very beginning' (p. 176). Or, in my own words- did he accomplish what he set out to accomplish? In spite of any reservations and questions I would say that the answer to that question is yes. He nicely and astutely examined and

explained the origins of Israelite society and traced the continuities and differences in a comprehensible and intelligent manner. And at the end of the day, he suggests a step forward when he notes 'I would say that the social history of Israel I have presented here has fulfilled its purpose if it is viewed as a frame or background' (p. 179). To what? Theological materials.

Yes, it accomplished its purpose. I commend it to interested students of Israel's history. You will learn a great deal from it; in terms of what you learn that's new, in terms of what you'll argue with, and in terms of areas where further thought is provoked.

Enjoy.